

Care-Experienced & Care Leaver Students

The Big Idea

Not all students arrive at university with the same support behind them.

Some have grown up in care, or without family support — and that shapes their entire experience of education.



Understanding who these students are is the first step to building a #HomeAtUniversity.

Key Terms: What's The Difference?

The terms care leaver and care experienced are related, but they are not interchangeable. Both originate from children's social care systems and legislation across the UK, but they are used differently when determining eligibility for support.

Care leaver is a legal status with specific criteria attached to it. Care experienced is a broader term that recognises a wider range of care backgrounds. The distinction is particularly important in higher education and student finance, where Scotland and England & Wales use different approaches.

Care Leaver

A legally defined status used across the UK.

Often linked to statutory rights and entitlements, including leaving-care services and ongoing support from local authorities.



Continued

In Scotland, this generally applies to someone who ceased to be looked after on or after their 16th birthday.

In England and Wales, the definition is more restrictive and generally requires a young person to have been in care for at least 13 weeks after the age of 14, including some time aged 16 or over.

In England and Wales, care-leaver status is commonly used by Student Finance bodies and universities when determining eligibility for targeted support.



Focus: a legally defined group entitled to specific support and protections.

Care Experienced

A broader, more inclusive term.

Includes people who have experienced care or a looked-after background at any stage of their life, however brief. May include foster care, residential care, kinship care, being looked after at home under local authority supervision, or adoption from care.

In Scotland, care experienced is the key term used across higher education, widening access and student-support frameworks. Scottish universities and student-support systems are expected to identify and support care-experienced students, not just those who meet the legal definition of a care leaver.

In England and Wales, there is no single agreed definition of care experience, and institutions may apply the term differently.



Focus: recognising a broad range of care backgrounds, regardless of whether someone meets the legal definition of a care leaver.

In Practice

While Care Leaver is the formal designation used in England and Wales (including for funding and statutory support), many universities are broadening their internal approach to “care-experienced”. This allows them to offer more inclusive, bespoke support to students who may not meet the strict legal definition but still face similar challenges.



Continued

Lived Experience

Care-experienced and care leaver students may have experienced:

-  Placement instability (moving between homes or carers)
-  Disrupted education
-  Trauma, loss, and life-changing early experiences
-  Limited or no family support
-  Navigating systems independently from a young age

Not all students will share the same experiences, but many will have reached university entirely against the odds.

What Support Might Be Missing?

Unlike many other students, they may not have access to:

-  A stable home to return to between semesters/terms
-  Family financial support or a safety net
-  Trusted adults for advice and guidance
-  Practical help (moving, setting up accommodation)
-  Emotional reassurance and advocacy



Things that are often “invisible” in university systems make a huge difference day to day.

Impact On Education

These gaps can have real consequences:

-  Higher risk of not progressing or completing
-  Increased stress and mental health challenges
-  Difficulty focusing due to external pressures
-  Barriers to seeking help (due to stigma, awareness, or low trust)



Students aren't just managing their studies, they're often managing everything around them too.

Why Housing Is Such A Big Issue

Housing is one of the most critical pressure points. Without a family home to rely on, students may face:

✗ No accommodation outside term time

💰 High and unpredictable housing costs

🔄 Frequent moves and instability

⚠️ Risk of homelessness at transitions



Housing isn't just one issue, it's the foundation that everything else depends on.

What This Means for SU Officers

Understanding this context helps you ask better questions:

? Who is being identified as care-experienced, care leaver

? Where might restrictive definitions be excluding students from support?

? What assumptions is our university making about "home"?

? Are services designed with these experiences in mind?

And importantly:

📢 Challenge "one-size-fits-all" approaches

🔍 Highlight hidden gaps in eligibility and support

🏛️ Push for inclusive definitions and flexible support models



Continued

Key Takeaway

This isn't about labels. It's about:

Recognising different starting points

Understanding hidden inequalities

Designing systems that work for everyone



A #HomeAtUniversity starts with knowing who doesn't already have one.

Estranged Students

The Big Idea

Not all students have a family they can rely on, and those that don't may not have been in care. Some are studying at university without the support, contact, or safety net of their family. These are estranged students.



Estranged students experience of university can be very different from their peers.

What Does “Estranged” Mean?

An estranged student is someone who has no contact with their parents or family, and where that relationship breakdown is irreconcilable. It can happen at different times; some students may arrive at university already estranged, while others may become estranged during their studies.

This usually means:

No emotional support

No financial support

No practical support (like somewhere to stay)

Estrangement is recognised across the UK, but how it is tracked and supported varies:

England: Recognised in Student Finance, but identification can be inconsistent across institutions

Scotland & Wales: Estranged students are typically tracked more consistently in formal returns but may be less embedded in student support systems due to a more extensive populations of care experienced students.



In practice: Estrangement is complex, personal, and often hard to disclose or evidence.

A Growing and Better-Understood Group

As universities improve how they identify and track estrangement:

 The number of estranged students being recorded is increasing

 Awareness is growing across institutions

 More universities are developing targeted support offers



This doesn't necessarily mean estrangement itself is increasing – but that it is becoming more visible and better understood.

Lived Experience

Estranged students may have experienced:

 Family breakdown, conflict, or rejection

 Being asked to leave home or choosing to leave for safety

 Loss of contact with family networks

 Trauma, isolation, or instability

 Navigating life independently at a young age



Many are balancing study with full independence and limited support.

LGBTQ+ Students

There is a significant overlap between estranged students and the LGBTQ+ community.

Some students become estranged because of:

 Their sexual orientation or gender identity

 Lack of acceptance or family rejection

 Unsafe or hostile home environments

This means effective support should be:

Inclusive

Trauma-informed

Aware of intersecting identities

What Support Might Be Missing?

Estranged students often do not have access to:

- ❤️ Family financial support or emergency help
- 🏠 A home to return to during holidays
- 📦 Help with moving or setting up accommodation
- 📞 Trusted adults for advice and advocacy
- 🧠 Consistent emotional support



They may also face barriers in proving estrangement to access support.

Impact On Education

These challenges can have a real impact:

- ⚠️ Higher risk of dropping out
- 💰 Financial instability affecting participation
- 🧠 Increased stress and mental health challenges
- 🚫 Low trust in seeking help



Students are not just managing their studies, they're often managing everything around them too.

Why Housing Is Such A Big Issue

Housing is often the central pressure point. Without a family home, estranged students may face:

- ✗ No accommodation outside term time
- 💰 Expensive or insecure private renting
- 🔑 Barriers like needing a rent guarantor
- ⚠️ Risk of homelessness at key transition points



Housing insecurity isn't just one issue – it affects every part of the student experience.



Continued

What This Means for SU Officers

Understanding estrangement helps you challenge assumptions in your system.

Ask your institution:

? How are estranged students identified – and how easy is that process?

? Are evidence requirements creating barriers?

? How consistently are estranged students tracked?

? Are support services inclusive of LGBTQ+ experiences?

And importantly:

 Amplify student voices

 Highlight where systems assume family support

 Advocate for flexible, visible, and inclusive support

Key Takeaway

This isn't just about family breakdown. It's about:

Independence without a safety net

Systems not designed for that reality

Students navigating university alone



A #HomeAtUniversity means making sure no student is left without a place to belong.